

Aamir Ali

# A Siachen Peace Park: The Solution to a Half-Century of International Conflict?

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*Mountains have traditionally been havens for people seeking peace and spiritual solace. Nowhere has this been truer than in the Himalaya, the “Abode of the Gods,” from time immemorial. It is ironic, then, that in the Himalaya (or, to be more exact, in the Karakoram), a bitter, deadly, heroic, and absurd conflict is being fought. For 18 long years, the armed forces of India and Pak-*

*istan have fought on the Saltoro Ridge, south of the Siachen Glacier—the highest battlefield in the world. The creation of a Peace Park may contribute to resolving this half-century-old international conflict and preserving a unique high mountain environment currently being subjected to irreparable devastation.*

## The battle lines harden

Pakistan occupies the southern slopes of the Saltoro Ridge, whereas India occupies the northern slopes and the approximately 5480- to 6700-m ridge (Figure 1). The Line of Control (LOC) of 1972 demarcates the boundary in Kashmir between India and Pakistan up to a point known as NJ 9842. Beyond this point, demarcation is described by the vague statement, “... and thence north to the glaciers.” Because this desolate area was uninhabited and contained no troops, there was no compulsion to be more precise. For 35 years, this vague definition—or lack of definition—was not a problem. The LOC is 790 km long, and only a small section of it was left unmarked. The Siachen and the Saltoro were a virtual no-man’s-land.

Mountaineering expeditions eventually brought matters to a head. Access to the Siachen and neighboring peaks on the Teram Shehr and Rimo glaciers was easier from the Pakistani side. Pakistan began

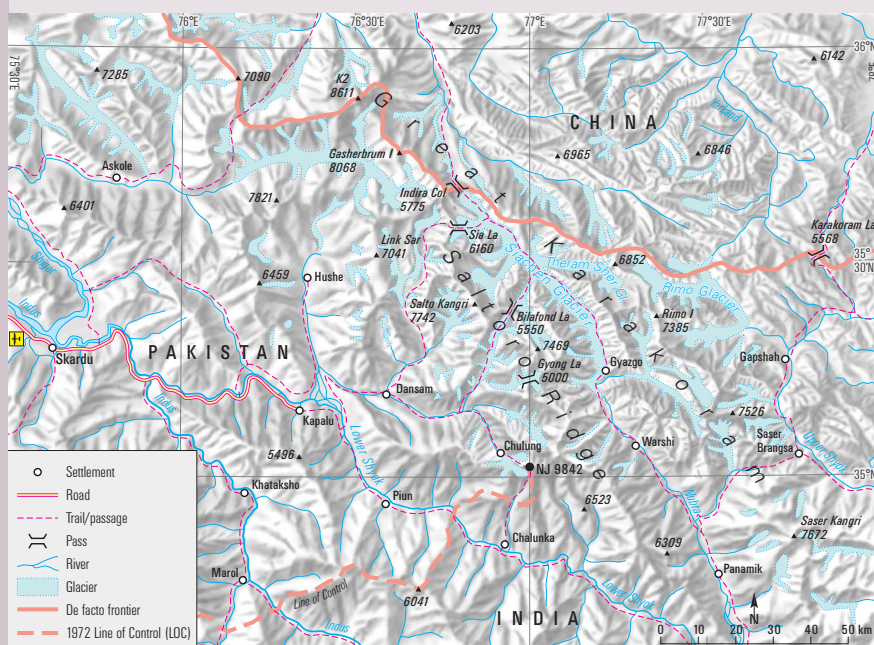
authorizing expeditions to the area; India, in turn, sent in its own expeditions. Both countries interpreted “north to the glaciers” in accordance with their own interests, and both included the Siachen–Saltoro (Figure 2). In April 1984, India preempted a Pakistani plan and moved troops onto the glacier and to the Saltoro Ridge. It occupied the key passes—the Sia La (6160 m) and the Bilafond La (5550 m). This in itself was an adventure and an achievement. The Indian Cheetah helicopter was just capable of reaching these heights, provided that it carried no more than 2 soldiers. It needed to ferry back and forth 17 times to get the minimum of men and equipment to within 3 km of the Bilafond La, whereas 32 sorties were required to man and equip the Sia La.

Bitter fighting took place, but the heights remained in Indian hands. Since then, sporadic fighting has taken place and continues to occur, whereas artillery fire is regularly exchanged with shells lobbed over the ridge at unseen foes. Although this might not destroy the enemy, it certainly destroys the environment.

## The limits of effort and endurance

Mere existence at these heights is an incredible hardship, let alone engaging in combat. The Indian base camp is at 3700 m, and there are over 100 posts at altitudes up to 6700 m. About 97% of the approximately 15,000 casualties have been due to altitude and weather rather than enemy action. The temperature dips to well below  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ , blizzards can blow at over 250 km per hour, and avalanches and crevasses regularly claim victims (Figure 3). The altitude makes it impossible for men to stay here for more than 3–4 weeks. They begin with a 3-week crash course in mountaineering.

**FIGURE 1** Topographical overview of the Siachen and the surrounding Karakoram region. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck)



**FIGURE 2** Location map giving a general overview of the disputed area. This map is not intended as an accurate reflection of the territorial claims made by the 2 countries. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck)

All supplies are brought by helicopter or air-dropped: tents, food, fuel, heaters, cookers, equipment, arms, ammunition, weapons, and rocket launchers (see cover photo of this issue). Heavy artillery is taken apart and the pieces flown in to be assembled at high altitude. Items get lost in the airdrops; the cold metal can tear the skin off human hands. The Indian Army can claim the highest helipad in the world, the highest dropping zone, and the highest public telephone booth!

Things are easier for Pakistan. The Pakistani base camp, more easily accessible, is at 2700 m, whereas Pakistan's advanced posts are at lower altitudes. It became a political imperative for Pakistan to establish a post on the Saltoro Ridge; it was equally imperative for India to prevent this. This has led to heroic battles. The most dramatic was in 1987, when in a daring mountaineering exploit using fixed ropes and ladders, Pakistani troops established a post on the Saltoro Ridge and named it Quaid. It was politically essential for the Indians to dislodge them from this position. The first attempt was made by a patrol of 9 men, who climbed the steep



north face by night securing the passage with fixed ropes. Moving along the ridge, they came under heavy fire, which killed 5 of them, leaving the remaining 4 to withdraw. The next attack was carried out by a volunteer force of 60 men operating in 2 groups. This was successful, and the post was captured. It was then named the Bana post in honor of Naib Subedar Bana Singh, who led the final assault.

### Environmental consequences

The pollution and degradation of the environment, resulting from thousands of men living at these heights, is appalling (Figure 4). The cans, drums, fuel containers, oil and lubricants, tetrapacks for fruit juice, aluminum packaging, chemicals, and medical waste can neither be burned nor destroyed, nor can any of them be removed. Human waste amounts to 1000 kg a day on the Indian side alone. It is packed in metal drums and dropped into crevasses at the rate of up to 4000 drums a year. Then there is the war material: guns, arms, millions of rounds for small arms, ammunition, shells. As a senior Indian army officer remarked, "it is all flown in but nothing will ever be flown back." A noted Pakistani mountaineer, Nazir Sabir, observed that "glaciers are not meant for men to live on ... anguish and anger can well up when you've seen shell casings and piles of garbage on glaciers," or as General Vinod Saigal has written: "The highest battleground in the world has created, in addition to the human suffering under-

*"Unbelievable as it may sound, this glacier has many rose plants on the moraine, edges and walls surrounding it. And as in Balti, 'rose' is 'sia,' the glacier gets its name." (Harish Kapadia, in his article "Lots in a Name")*



**FIGURE 3** Indian army soldiers crossing a bridge on the Siachen Glacier. (Photo by Harish Kapadia)





**FIGURE 4** An army camp on the Siachen Glacier, showing refuse after days of camping. None of this garbage will be evacuated. (Photo by Harish Kapadia)

*“... surveillance help would also have to include sophisticated airborne radar scanners and night-vision video cameras, such as the Lynx and Skyball systems developed for the Predator unmanned monitoring aircraft that have proved so effective in Afghanistan.”*  
(Selig S. Harrison, in “An American role is crucial,” *International Herald Tribune*, 12 June 2002)

gone by the troops on both sides, environmental devastation whose effects will only be known once the troops pull out.”

Eventually, all this garbage and waste will end up in the Nubra River, which flows into the Shyok River, which flows into the Indus, on whose waters millions of people depend. The Himalaya is the water tower of Asia; to put its environment at risk is to gamble with the lives of millions (Figure 5).

### **Financial drain and military stalemate**

Apart from the heavy cost in lives and the human suffering resulting from this situation, the financial drain is heavy. It costs India an estimated US\$ 1 million per day; the cost to Pakistan is less but is nevertheless a heavy drain.

Over the years, both sides have dug in and neither expects a military solution.

Much of the fighting is now restricted to artillery fire, which presumably causes some damage to enemy positions but definitely causes a great deal of damage to the fragile mountain environment. Both countries would be happy to end this situation. Between 1986 and 1998, there were 7 rounds of talks between the 2 countries in search of a solution. At one time it seemed as if agreement was near on redeployment and the creation of a zone of tranquility, but the political climate changed and the moment was lost. Recently, with the infiltration of armed militants into Kashmir, the 13 December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, and the 14 May 2002 killings in Jammu, hopes for a solution have faded. As C. Raja Mohan, Strategic Affairs Editor of *The Hindu*, put it, “After 1991, the Siachen talks became hostage to the Kashmir militancy program, and lately to the reluctance of both armies to withdraw from a line which has cost so many lives.”

### **A park for peace**

There is one solution that could follow up on the near agreement reached in 1989 and give it a positive dimension: turning the entire area into a Transboundary Peace Park. This would enable both armies to withdraw under conditions of honor and dignity; it would not prejudice their positions on Kashmir as a whole; it would stop further degradation of a magnificent mountain area; it would save thousands of lives and billions of rupees; it would heal a running sore in the Kashmir imbroglio. Any agreement to withdraw forces would, of course, have to be backed by cast-iron assurances that there would be no cheating. Ground-based and air surveillance, such as is used along the Mexico–US border, or was used in 1973 to monitor the Sinai Desert Cease Fire, could ensure this. The mountain terrain would present special difficulties, but from reports of recent discussions, it may be assumed that these can be overcome.

Transboundary parks are not a new idea. The first one, the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park between Canada and the United States, was established 70 years ago. Several transboundary parks are specifically designated as Peace Parks,

intended to provide a peaceful solution to a conflict or potential conflict or contribute to the rehabilitation of an area after a conflict. There has been a dramatic increase in transboundary parks in recent years—a demonstration of their viability and usefulness: from 59 such parks in 1998, the number has increased to 169 today, involving 113 countries. Examples include the Cordillera del Condor Peace Transborder Reserve between Peru and Ecuador, a long-disputed frontier; La Amistad National Park between Costa Rica and Nicaragua; and the Prespa Park between Albania, Greece, and Macedonia. A Peace Parks Foundation has been established in South Africa, and 2 parks have already been set up: the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park between South Africa and Botswana and a transfrontier park between South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Currently there are plans for 6 more transboundary parks.

In his excellent book on the Siachen, General V. R. Raghavan makes some realistic, commonsense suggestions for ending the Siachen conflict. Raghavan was the Commanding General in the Siachen and was on the Indian team in at least 4 of the 7 rounds of talks between India and Pakistan. He combines detailed knowledge of the situation on the ground with a deep appreciation of political considerations. His words deserve attention. He suggests that both sides recognize each other's claims, agree not to change the status quo by force, and agree not to introduce irregulars. This would be followed by 3 steps:

1. End the fighting without disengaging or redeployment. Let Siachen recede from the public mind; this phase might last for 2–3 years.
2. Introduce technical means of monitoring and surveillance, permitting meaningful reductions of forces to be negotiated.
3. Work out a complete demilitarization.

The concept of a Transboundary Peace Park fits in completely with these suggestions, giving a positive dimension to the process. It would work not only toward disengagement but also toward the creation of a park to protect the environment—to allow the ibex, the snow leopard, and the wild roses to return. An informal group of the World Commission on



**FIGURE 5** A huge ice cave in the Siachen Glacier—a striking visible reminder of the impact of global warming, another major anthropogenic source of risk. (Photo by Harish Kapadia)

Protected Areas (WPCA) is promoting the idea of such a park.

Last year, the area of the Aletsch, the longest glacier in the European Alps, was designated as a World Heritage Site. It would be fitting if the Siachen, the longest mountain glacier in the world, were to take a step in that direction in the International Year of Mountains. It is situated close to the world's most impressive cluster of 8000-m peaks, in a majestic mountain landscape redolent with the romance of early exploration. It is said, on both sides of the LOC, that to honor the blood of brave soldiers that has been spilled, not an inch of territory should be given up. One could say with even more emphasis that the sacrifice of brave men could best be honored by protecting a spectacular area consecrated with their blood.

At present, with a million armed men facing each other across the Kashmir border, talk of ending the fighting and of peace parks seems remote. But the dawn always comes after the darkest period: perhaps there will also be a dawn for the Siachen.

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Aamir Ali is a member of the WCPA Informal Group working to promote the idea of the Siachen Peace Park. He was an official of the International Labour Organization (ILO) for almost 40 years and is now settled in Geneva. He has climbed extensively in the Alps and has made several expeditions to the Himalayas. A veteran of the Swiss Alpine Club and an Honorary Member of the Himalayan Club, he has also written several novels and nonfiction works.

#### FURTHER READING

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